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Common grace as theological encouragement for interreligious dialogue

ABSTRACT

The Dutch theologian-statesman Abraham Kuyper developed the doctrine of common grace in a lengthy manner. Common grace emphasises that God's grace operates not only in a salvific way for the elect, but also in a general way for every individual. Despite sin, human beings are capable of doing beautiful, just, and wise things and are endowed with gifts and talents, due to God's act of common grace. On that doctrinal basis, Christians are called upon to appreciate the people outside the church, for there are fruits of common grace in their lives. On many occasions, Kuyper acknowledged that people of other religions have better qualities than Christians. Although not salvific, common grace opens various possibilities for Christians to learn from non-Christians. Thus, common grace could be a theological encouragement for interreligious dialogue toward mutual enrichment. This doctrine shows how the interreligious relationship between Christians and non-Christians should not be reduced to evangelism alone; it should also include dialogue and further cooperation toward the common good.

1. INTRODUCTION

In many discussions in theology and religious studies, doctrine is often viewed as an obstacle to dialogue. This article shows how a doctrine such as common grace could, from a theological perspective, motivate interreligious dialogue. It also shows how doctrinal matters could affect the Christian attitude toward non-Christian culture and religion.

Dialogue is essential for building relationships across religious traditions. The term “dialogue” has been understood in a wide variety of meanings from friendly exchanges, peaceful coexistence, engagement with teachings and practices of other religions, cooperation on social issues, and common prayer to participation in the ritual of other religions (Cornille 2013:20). Without dialogue and relationships with people of other religions, a religious community would concede to the temptation of balkanisation. Berger views the connection between religious fundamentalism and the tendency of isolation or balkanisation. While the pluralist position would seek to find a way to co-exist in one society with people of different ethnicities, moralities, and religions, religious fundamentalism would choose the balkanisation of society that might lead to conflicts or even totalitarian coercion (Berger 2014:15). Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992:118) define religious fundamentalism as

the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity (see also Mbote *et al.* 2021:168).

Fundamentalists also believe that, since they have these fundamental teachings, they have a special relationship with God. Any opposition to those fundamental teachings is regarded as an evil force and should thus be vigorously opposed. The signature of fundamentalism is their exclusive theological understanding.

In Indonesia, religious fundamentalism is a massive challenge for interreligious relationships. In 2008, Paramadina University, an Islamic University in Jakarta, published a comprehensive account of the religion-based conflict in Indonesia and concluded that 832 cases of interreligious violence took place between 1990 and 2008. The statistics indicate that approximately 46 cases of interreligious conflict occur annually in Indonesia. In 2017, Islamic fundamentalist groups also forced the government to use the blasphemy law against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Chinese-Indonesian Christian Governor of Jakarta (Lattu 2019:74). According to the Indonesian State Intelligence Agency (BIN), youngsters aged between 17 and 24 years are prone to be influenced by radical ideologies (Anon [n.d.]). Extreme examples include joining ISIS and other terrorist networks, suicide bombings, and many other violent actions. However, the seed of that kind of extremism is the attitude of intolerance. In its nature, fundamentalism and radicalism have the same roots: ignorance of diversity and rejection of plurality (Lorantina *et al.* 2017). It is thus crucial to produce a robust theological understanding of tolerance that enables people to freely engage in dialogue, friendship, and further cooperation.

Theology has become an obstacle not only for the interreligious, but also for the intrareligious ones. One prominent example is the disunity of the churches that attended The Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work, in Stockholm, Sweden, 19-29 August 1925. The conference was attended by 600 delegates from Orthodox and Protestant churches from 37 countries. The Roman Catholics did not send any delegates, despite being invited. The conference concerned primarily the church's relationship with six topics: the general obligation of the church to the world; economic and industrial problems; social and moral problems; international relations; education, and inter-church cooperation. Unfortunately, the conference failed to unite the churches into action. The only official document that emerged from the conference was "The Message of the Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work", approved by the assembly. At the same time, the delegates did not approve any formal reports. Many theological debates took place during the conference, namely concerning the establishment and nature of the Kingdom of God on earth; national or confessional categories such as "American activism" and "German otherworldliness"; Lutherans against Calvinists, and other doctrinal matters. That occasion led to the cry of the Stockholm Conference, "Doctrine divides, but service unites" (Fitzgerald 2004:90).

Although doctrinal issues could be a massive obstacle for intra- and interreligious relationships, it could also be a great encouragement for both. In developing the doctrine of common grace, the Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper explicitly showed his appreciation for non-Christians and other Christian denominations. He believed that, due to common grace, the sinful nature of humanity would not be fully manifested, so that the world would become hell. Instead, he argued that through common grace God actively restrains the sin of both Christians and non-Christians. This enables the fruits of common grace to spring in the form of beauty, justice, wisdom, truth, and all kinds of goodness, be it in Christian or non-Christian society.¹ Kuyper's *Common grace* has been translated into English in three volumes, consisting of over 1,700 pages. By arguing theologically that the fruit of common grace can be found anywhere in the world, Kuyper encouraged his readers (Christians) to engage with the plural world, learning and being enriched

1 Another profound theological basis for interreligious dialogue is the document *Nostra Aetate* from the Second Vatican Council. The official title of the document is the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. The document does not contain the term "dialogue"; instead it used the phrase "discussion and collaboration". However, the spirit of dialogue is clearly there. In his encyclical letter *Ecclesiam Suam* (published prior to the third session of the Second Vatican Council) Pope Paul VI wrote that "dialogue" should be practised by the church. He commended that "[t]he Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make" (Fitzgerald 2018:26; see Paul VI 1964:609-659).

by the non-Christian cultures. While many theological issues could lead to disunity and failure to appreciate diversity, Kuyper's common grace could be a solid and rich theological ground toward unity and appreciation of deep diversity. Common grace could be a Christian theological encouragement for interreligious dialogue.

This article on Christian theology uses the perspective of historical theology, an approach that profoundly analyses the life and contribution of a theologian or theological movement. This approach strongly emphasises how theology emerges out of a particular historical context. Analysing the development of a doctrine in its historical context could help theologians view its present-day relevance to other contexts (Dreyer & Pillay 2017:128). This article first examines Kuyper's common grace in its original context, and then draws its implications for current interreligious dialogue.

2. COMMON GRACE²

Kuyper's theological work, entitled *Common grace*, originates from a series of publications in the Dutch national newspaper *De Heraut* between September 1895 and July 1901. In the 1880s, Kuyper focused on writing on the issue of particular grace³ to increase the internal unity and doctrinal awareness of his Reformed Christian followers. From 1895 onwards, he focused on the doctrine of common grace to encourage his followers to engage with the broader plural society and culture of that time. Kuyper developed common grace as a public theology of responsibility for Christians. Faith should not only be limited to its private implications, but it should also be manifested and bear implications for the public sphere for the common good. Kuyper vehemently opposed Christians who think that faith leads them to flee from the world and live in isolation from society at large (Kuyper 1998:165-166).

In 1874, Kuyper wrote a series in *De Heraut* under the title *Natural knowledge of God*. In that series, he argues that the point of contact between the church and the world outside lies in the "natural knowledge of God" or in a kind of "natural theology". In his *Encyclopedia of sacred theology*, Kuyper (1898a:301) states that such a natural knowledge is not possible in the mind of fallen sinners, unless it is preserved by God's common grace. Compared

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- 2 Kuyper's *Common grace* has been translated into English in three volumes, containing over 1,700 pages. (See Kuyper 2015; 2019; 2020). Hereafter, all references to *Common grace* will be abbreviated as CG.
 - 3 Briefly, Kuyper understood particular grace as referring to God's salvific grace. It is not given to all, but only to those who have faith in Christ. Common grace is different. It is not salvific, but universal in its nature. Common grace does not cleanse sin; it restrains sin (Davie *et al.* 2016:377-378).

to the natural knowledge of God, common grace has become a better vehicle for Kuyper's vision of Christian cultural engagement. Kuyper found that the bridge between the church and the world should be much broader than merely an epistemological bridge (Douma 2017:123-24).

In the Reformed tradition, Calvin briefly mentioned common grace in his *Institutes*. While writing on the relationship between God's grace and sinful human nature, Calvin (2011:292) wrote:

But here it ought to occur to us that amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God's grace; not such as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly.

Calvin was open to the possibility that God's grace sometimes restrains but does not cleanse sin. However, Kuyper thought that this doctrine was significantly underdeveloped in the broader Reformed tradition. He understood that, during the church reformation, the Reformed theologians should engage in a "tireless battle with pen and sword" against the ecclesiastical monopoly of the Roman church. Thus, the purity of the gospel and the issue of salvation had become the central concern of the theologians of that time. However, Kuyper argues that the Christian faith should not only deal with the issue of the salvation of the soul, but also reflect upon the relationship between Christian life and the "life of the world in all of its manifestation and diversity" (CG I:xxxiv-xxxvi).

When discussing God's relationship to the fallen creatures, Calvin refers to Matthew 5:45, which states that God "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Calvin 2011:1004). Although the verse was also essential to Kuyper, he grounded the doctrinal development of common grace in a more elaborate biblical narrative: the Noahic covenant. The establishment of God's covenant with Noah after the flood was the "fixed historical starting point" for the doctrine. God's anger and the act of punishing the sin and wickedness of the entire world, through the flood in Genesis 6, eventually ended in Genesis 8, when God remembered Noah and all the animals with him in the ark. God promised that, while the earth remains, cold and heat, seedtime and harvest time, winter and summer, day and night, shall not cease (Gen. 8:22). Briefly, God promised life to humanity and all creation after punishing the world with the flood. Kuyper wrote:

After the flood, God provided his covenant: his covenant given to this earth, to all who were called human beings, his covenant even to the animal world and to all of nature (CG I:18).

Kuyper also developed the doctrine of common grace Christologically, using the concept of "mediator of creation". According to Kuyper, Christ could only

be the “mediator of redemption”, if he is first the “mediator of creation”. A sound Christology does not start with baby Jesus in the manger, but first as the eternal Word through whom God created all things (CG 2:724). When God decreed the consummation of all creation, the Son of God was present in determining all issues, as well as those concerning himself (the incarnated Christ). Kuyper wrote:

Because the eternal Word is both before the decree as well as included in the decree, and because he maintains the unity of creation and redemption in his own person based on the decree, the redemptive work of particular grace cannot stand in isolation from and outside of the life of the world (CG 2:725).

The inseparable relationship between particular and common grace is found in the person of God-man Jesus Christ who is the mediator of both creation and redemption. Therefore, the life of those who are redeemed and the life of the world should not be isolated. While Kuyper affirmed the depraved human nature caused by sin, he did not fall into the temptation of being entirely pessimistic about viewing life on the sinful earth. The narrative of Noah in the Bible shows that God would never allow sin to manifest itself in the world fully. The earth would never turn into hell; instead, God promised Noah and all creation that life would continue to flourish on earth, and that promise would not be revoked. Common grace is God’s intervention in the sinful world, whereby he restrains evil and releases goodness (CG II:469).

Volume three of *Common grace* contains Kuyper’s practical application of the doctrine. It deals with wide-ranging topics from civil society, government, institutional church, the relationship between church and state, family, science, and art.⁴ This demonstrates Kuyper’s commitment to encourage Christians to contribute to the broader public in many possible ways. The transition of the Dutch society from traditionally a Christian nation to a more plural and diverse society did not discourage Kuyper; rather, it led him to reflect upon it theologically. The doctrinal development of common grace shows how Kuyper could become an example of a “walking public theology”. On the one hand, common grace provides a legitimate reason and possibilities for Christians to engage in society at large, such as in business, culture, politics, and art (Bacote 2020:xxviii). On the other hand, this doctrine shows how goodness, justice, beauty, and truth could be found outside Christian communities. Christians should accept such fruits of common grace wherever they may find it (Mouw 2015:xxix).

4 All those topics are discussed in 71 chapters in CG III.

3. DOCTRINAL HUMILITY

Cornille (2013:21-22) argues that “epistemological humility” and “hospitality toward the truth of other (religions)” are required for dialogue. The first refers to the attitude of a religious person that affirms the room for a growing understanding of truth. The second refers to the presupposition that other religions could be a potential source for that growth. She does not mean that dialogue should lead to theological relativism, believing that no religion is theologically true. Instead, understanding other religious teachings and practices could lead a religious person to a deeper understanding of one’s religion. Cornille also called those conditions “doctrinal humility”, a discovery of a theological or religious motivation to dialogue with other religions. She argues that doctrines are not to be ignored; they should rather be a solid basis to encourage dialogue. Eck (2005:43-44) argues that relativism is antithetical to pluralism. There are “two shades” of relativism in stark contrast with the attitude of pluralism. One is the nihilistic tendency that denies any religious truth. The other is its lack of commitment. Pluralism assumes not only openness, but also commitment. Pluralism can only generate a strong social bond by the “interweaving of commitments”. There are Christian pluralists, Hindu pluralists, and even humanistic pluralists, but there is no generic pluralist. Pluralism entails a theological task not to neutralise those commitments but to create room for the “encounter of commitments”. Interreligious dialogue is not an interaction between two or more uncommitted or irreligious persons; rather, it is the interaction between two or more committed religious persons.

Interreligious dialogue is now understood primarily under three modes, namely the head, the hand, and the heart. The head deals with the attitude of willingness to learn from other religions; the hand points toward interreligious cooperation, joining hands with people of other religions to make the world better, and the heart refers to the emotional aspect of awe towards the spirit and aesthetic expressions of the other religions (Swidler 2013:6). Of those three modes, doctrinal humility is directly related to the dialogue of the head and to the dialogue of the heart, because, without it, one cannot understand nor be filled with awe when interacting with other religions. However, the dialogue of the hand can occur even without discussing doctrine at all. Of course, this does not mean that doctrine cannot encourage cooperation, but cooperation as such does not always require doctrinal motivation. The following sub-chapter elaborates on how doctrine, especially common grace, could be a theological motivation for interreligious cooperation.

Besides creating possibilities for dialogue of the head, the doctrine of common grace could lead to the dialogue of the heart. Kuyper practised the dialogue of the heart when, on 5 August 1905, he went around the Mediterranean Sea to visit some twenty different countries. On his return

home in June 1906, he wrote a travelogue containing his impressions of the people there, especially on Islam as their religion. The travelogue was published in Dutch as *Om de oude wereldzee* ("Around the old world sea"), which was recently translated into English as *On Islam*.⁵

Kuyper's *On Islam* clearly shows how he practised the doctrine of common grace. As a male Dutch politician (former Prime Minister), a former pastor of Amsterdam church, and a Christian theologian, Kuyper's critical view on Islam did not hinder him from explicitly appreciating the religion. He praised the religious unity of Islam, as he wrote that without priestly order and organisational unity, "Islam nevertheless has managed to maintain a spiritual unity from beyond the Himalayas to the heart of Africa" (Kuyper 2017:29). He observed that, because Muslims did not rely on clergy or on a single all-encompassing organisation (as it is in Roman Catholicism), they sought strength in "personal sentiment" and the bond that "connects all Muslims to the tradition of Muhammad". Kuyper (2017:168) also admired the prophet Muhammad in his conviction that the supremacy of Allah is "all-embracing" and "all-encompassing" over all human existence. He found that Islam did not treat religion as only one aspect of life separated from politics, education, and the broader society; instead, Islam viewed religion as the net that spread over to unite all spheres of life.

In 1898, Kuyper delivered the Stone Lecture on Calvinism at Princeton Theological Seminary, for which he was awarded an honorary doctorate in law by Princeton University (De Bruijn 2014:242). In those lectures, he argued that Calvinism was not simply a system of religion that should be kept separate from other spheres of life, but a life system that encompasses all human domains. To him, Calvinism was a life system alongside other life systems such as Paganism, Islamism, and Roman Catholicism. That position indicates that his appreciation of Islam as a life system emerged even before travelling to the Mediterranean Sea countries. On the scientific achievement of Islam, he acknowledged that there was a time when science flourished in a better way than in cathedral and monastic schools in Europe. The recovery of Aristotle's writings was due to the scientific progress of Islam (Kuyper 1898:154). He also acknowledged that the university of Al-Azhar in Cairo was the place where Islamic science had profoundly grown. It had become a place where "humanities, theology, [and] jurisprudence were taught. Even astronomy, mathematics, and natural sciences received attention" (Vliet 2017:20).

5 Originally published in Dutch as *Om de oude wereldzee*. In 2017, Jan van Vliet translated the travelogue *On Islam* into English. See Kuyper (1908; 2017).

In *On Islam*, Kuyper also wrote how he met students from Java who studied at Al-Azhar University. He invited them to his hotel, and conversed with them through an interpreter. He found their conversation “very interesting”. Kuyper (2017:191) was impressed by their “special religious zeal” and “strong intelligence”. Kuyper also wrote his impressions while observing Friday prayers in Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, a church in the past that had become a mosque. He listened to the preacher with the aid of an interpreter: “The audience listened so closely that I also was most interested in what he said” (Kuyper 2017:54).

4. THEOLOGICAL ENCOURAGEMENT FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

In his work, entitled *Christian hospitality and Muslim immigration in an age of fear*, Kaemingk (2018) argues that Kuyper’s common grace could lead to the notion of common humanity. Common grace affirms the work of the Holy Spirit as not limited to the salvation of Christians alone, but also as an active, generous force that works to make people of all faiths and cultures flourish. Kuyper was highly confident in the cosmic work of the Holy Spirit that brings all faiths and cultures together towards a moment of consensus and cooperation for the common good. However, he was not certain when this would happen. Thus, from a Kuyperian perspective, the moment of interreligious cooperation would always be temporary and unpredictable, depending on the work of the Holy Spirit alone. A Christian should faithfully seek that moment and pray for the Holy Spirit to bring that moment into reality (Kaemingk 2018:148).

The theological notion of common humanity is centred on the theological term *Imago Dei*, meaning that everyone bears the image of God. Kuyper insisted that everyone is organically united with the whole human race, despite religious differences.⁶ There is only one humanity, not only with the present generation, but also with the past and future generations. Kuyper viewed the distinction between those inside and outside the church not as an ontological one. No amount of violence, injustice, and evil could strip the divine image of every human being. People from all cultures, times, and faiths stand equal to one another. Sin might break the human “ideological unity”, but its “ontological

6 Although Kuyper never doubted the concept of *imago Dei*, readers should note that he had a poor view of the African tribes and people. He saw Africans as the descendants of Ham (CG 1:109), and he believed that common grace operates at the lowest level among African tribes. Kuyper’s treatment of the African native population as a lesser civilisation can be found in many places in his *Common grace* such as, for example, CG 1:42, 52, 497; CG 2: 467, 760; CG 3:24, 74, 137. This racial bias shows limitations to the original notion of Kuyper’s common grace to encourage dialogue.

unity remains intact" (Kaemingk 2018:152). Across cultures and faiths, the Holy Spirit, through common grace, has preserved the creational norms and laws. Although different cultures have different moralities, humanity is never left in total moral fragmentation or confusion. Although cultural and religious disagreements will always occur from time to time, those disagreements will never be absolute (Kaemingk 2018:154).

Common grace is a theological motivation to seek commonness. The understanding of *shalom* in the Bible is related to the idea of the common good of society at large, not only for Christians. In order to actively promote the common good, Christians should not isolate themselves from the plural society. Instead, they should speak and build a relationship with society at large. Christians should regard themselves not only as evangelists who spread the gospel, but also as agents of common grace (Richard 2002:80). This understanding is related to what Swidler (2013:6) labels as the "dialogue of the hand", interreligious people who engage in dialogue through cooperation in a particular social action. Knitter argues that people from different religions could have "unnecessary suffering" as the one thing in common. The suffering of others could generate an immediate response from the people, even before they conceptualise it into a thought. Knitter (2013:141) evokes Mencius' illustration:

Any human being witnessing a child losing its balance on the edge of a well will, without thinking or analyzing, reach out to prevent that child from falling ... human heart cannot bear the sufferings of others.

By becoming a "community of solidarity" with those who suffer oppression, people from different religions could be a "community of conversation". Interreligious cooperation could be fostered through solidarity in the struggle against oppression and suffering. "Trying to do the truth together enables us to know the truth together" (Knitter 2013:143). The doctrine of common grace might not be the ultimate solution to every problem in the interreligious relationship. It could, however, be a solid doctrinal starting point that motivates Christians to engage in dialogue with the plural society outside the church walls. The promotion of dialogue is in itself a Christian ministry for the common good of society (Ariarajah 2019:627).

5. CONCLUSION

Theology has often become a primary obstacle to interreligious dialogue. In the context of the Christian church alone, many churches have found it difficult to engage one another in a constructive dialogue, due to the tendency to over-emphasise differences among them. The situation is even more challenging

for the relationship between Christians and those of other religions. The doctrine of common grace, developed by the Dutch statesman-theologian Abraham Kuyper, could showcase how doctrine does not always divide but could also develop an appreciation for people of other cultures and religions. Rooted in the Noahic covenant, God's covenant with humanity, animals, and all creation, the doctrine of common grace could be a solid theological basis for the conviction that there is goodness, beauty, justice, and truth in every culture and religion. This doctrine does not advocate theological relativism. Instead, it provides a solid theological principle of how a genuinely committed Christian could engage in a constructive dialogue with other committed religious adherents and the plural society at large.

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